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# Anchoring Free Indirect Discourse and Viewpoint Shifting <sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper reports the results of four experiments that investigated how readers determine the anchor for free reports in narratives, i.e. descriptions of someone’s perceptions (*Viewpoint Shifting*) or thoughts (*Free Indirect Discourse*) that can be ascribed to the narrator or to a character. Readers tended to ascribe free reports to the locally prominent character, i.e. the one that was mentioned as the experiencer in the preceding sentence. Additionally, readers chose that character more strongly in third-person narratives compared to first-person ones. In first-person stories with a locally prominent narrator, a strong preference for the narrator was found instead. In third-person stories with two experiencers, free thought reports were more likely to trigger non-speaker-oriented readings, compared to perception reports. These results provide further empirical evidence about the environments that favour speaker- and non-speaker-oriented interpretations in narrative discourse.

**Keywords:** perspective taking · free indirect discourse · speech reports · perception reports · viewpoint shifting.

## 1 Introduction

Consider the following example:

- (1) It was all delicious.

The statement in (1) is subjective: it includes a so-called *predicate of personal taste* (Lasersohn 2005; Stephenson 2007; Pearson 2012; Bylinina 2014) (*delicious*) and expresses someone’s evaluation about the taste of something. In linguistics, the default epistemic anchor for utterances, speech acts and subjective expressions like *delicious* is considered to be the speaker. Non-speaker-oriented interpretations can arise nonetheless when, for instance, such expressions occur embedded under attitude verbs, as in example (2):

- (2) Harry thought that it was all delicious.

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In this case, it is Harry that serves as the anchor for *delicious*. But now consider (3), taken from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*:

- (3) Harry piled his plate with a bit of everything except the peppermints and began to eat. It was all delicious. (p.123)

Even though there is no embedding construction as in (2), we intuitively take Harry to be the person who thought that the food was delicious, not necessarily the narrator, the ‘speaker’ of the story. Still, the narrator-oriented interpretation is possible. It seems then that such unembedded, ‘free’ statements allow for multiple interpretations. How is the anchor determined in these cases and what licenses ‘shifted’, non-speaker-oriented interpretations?

Non-speaker-oriented interpretations have been discussed before (see Laser-sohn 2005 on *exocentric* interpretations) and recent studies have investigated, also empirically, shifted interpretations of standardly speaker-oriented expressions like appositives and predicates of personal taste, as well as the environments that license shifts to the perspective of an entity other than the speaker (Harris & Potts 2009; Kaiser 2015).

Phenomena where unembedded statements receive a shifted interpretation have gathered special attention in recent work on the semantics and pragmatics of narrative discourse. Narratives are especially interesting in this respect due to the multiplicity of perspectives (narrator and character(s)), as well as the different prominence status of the narrator and the protagonists. The phenomena in question are *Free Indirect Discourse* (Schlenker 2004; Sharvit 2008; Eckardt 2014; Maier 2015) and *Viewpoint Shifting* (Hinterwimmer 2017a). In short, Free Indirect Discourse is a vivid style of reporting a character’s thoughts/inner speech, whereas Viewpoint Shifting involves reporting a character’s low-level, non-linguistic mental state. Examples (3) and (4) are illustrations of Viewpoint Shifting and Free Indirect Discourse, respectively. The sentence *It was all delicious* in (3) is understood as a representation of the character’s sensory experience, while the sentences in italics in (4) are most naturally interpreted as the character’s inner speech:

- (4) One afternoon the following week, Clive had another idea. *It was a really amusing idea - one that would certainly make the public take notice. When should he do it? Tonight? No, he needed time to plan it.* (Woodrow Wilson’s Tie, P. Highsmith)

This paper focuses on the question of what pragmatic cues guide readers’ interpretations with respect to who the anchor is for such ambiguous passages in narratives and presents four experiments that explore the effect of different factors on determining the anchor.

## 2 Free Indirect Discourse and Viewpoint Shifting

Free Indirect Discourse (FID) has received extensive attention in semantics, where it is analysed either within bicontextual accounts (Schlenker 2004; Sharvit

2008; Eckardt 2014) or as a form of quotation (Maier 2015). FID is usually defined as a special form of reported speech that combines features of both direct and indirect discourse. While pronouns and tenses behave as in indirect discourse and are anchored to the narrator’s context (e.g. third-person pronouns refer to the character), temporal and locative indexicals as well as other subjective expressions (e.g. predicates of personal taste) reflect the character’s perspective (e.g. the adverb *tonight* in (4) refers to the day where the character is located). Additionally, in FID we find constructions like exclamations, questions, incomplete sentences and epithets, that are found in direct but not in indirect discourse. Such constructions are considered cues that signal the character’s perspective (Banfield 1982; Fludernik 2003). Recent experimental work by Kaiser (2015) has provided evidence that expressions like epithets and epistemic adverbs can in fact trigger non-speaker-oriented interpretations.

Hinterwimmer (2017a) argues that there is another kind of perspective shifting, *Viewpoint Shifting*, that involves reporting perceptions or mental states. According to Hinterwimmer, apart from being conceptually distinct from FID, Viewpoint Shifting is also grammatically different in that it does not involve context shifting. Abrusán (2018, 2019) also discusses FID and Viewpoint Shifting (with the latter under the header *Protagonist Projection*), but proposes a uniform semantic analysis for both phenomena. Another interesting view about what distinguishes thought from perception representations is Banfield’s (1982) assumption that the presence of questions and exclamations is restricted to thought representations. See (5): sentence (5a) can be understood as a report of what someone saw, whereas (5b) is understood as a report of someone’s inner speech.

- (5) a. And on the station platform was Clifford on crutches.
  - b. And on the station platform – Oh God! – was Clifford on crutches?
- (Banfield 1982, p. 204)

FID and Viewpoint Shifting are terms referring to perspective shifting phenomena. However, statements that occur free, i.e. without an overt embedding operator, allow for both speaker- and non-speaker-oriented interpretations. As I am interested in both readings, I will use the more general terms *free thought reports* and *free perception reports*. This term is also neutral with respect to whether the phenomenon termed as FID is a form of direct or indirect discourse.

### 3 Anchoring free reports: Pragmatic factors

What makes a character available as anchor for FID or Viewpoint Shifting? Hinterwimmer (2017b) addresses this question specifically for FID and proposes that a protagonist becomes an available anchor if (s)he is locally or globally prominent. Local prominence is defined in terms of being the experiencer of an eventuality mentioned in the sentence preceding FID. Global prominence is defined in terms of discourse topicality: a protagonist is globally prominent if (s)he is the person that the story is about. If two such protagonists are available,

as in (6), a FID passage (the question in italics) is potentially ambiguous as to whom it is anchored. In this case it is natural to ask what kind of prominence has a stronger effect: is the globally prominent character (*Mary* in (6)) or the locally prominent one (the referent of *he*) the most preferable anchor?

- (6) Mary went towards the entrance of the building. Suddenly a huge guy in a black coat came around the corner. She bumped into him head-on. Angrily, he smacked her in the face with his bag. *Why did everything go wrong today?* (Hinterwimmer 2017b)

With respect to Viewpoint Shifting, the most preferable anchor is expected to be the experiencer of a perceiving eventuality that has been mentioned or accommodated in the preceding discourse (Hinterwimmer 2017a; Abrusán 2019). Experimental findings (Kaiser 2018; Van Krieken 2018) have actually shown that readers would attribute a perceptual representation to the character that was explicitly mentioned as the perceiver, suggesting the importance of local prominence in perspectivisation.

Other factors that could affect the extent to which free reports trigger shifting are the type of narration and the type of report. With respect to the latter, perceptual experiences can be shared among different individuals when those are present in a scene (especially those related to the visual modality, cf. Kaiser 2018). By contrast, thoughts are internal, thus inaccessible to others except to oneself.

Regarding the narration type, in first-person narratives, the narrator is a character in the story and participates in the events, whereas the narrator of third-person narratives is an impersonal entity and more backgrounded compared to the character(s). Consequently, in first-person narratives, constructions like questions and exclamations will naturally be interpreted as questions and exclamations made by the narrator (the narrator could not report other characters' thoughts since (s)he does not have access to them<sup>1</sup>). On the other hand, descriptions that can be interpreted as perception representations could be attributed to either the narrator (if (s)he is part of the scene) or to the character that is the explicit experiencer. In third-person stories, thought and perception reports are overall expected to be anchored to the prominent protagonist, given the narrator's backgrounded status; this would also follow for views arguing against the presence of a narrator in FID texts (as Banfield 1982). Still, FID cues like questions and exclamations are expected to trigger a stronger preference for character-oriented interpretations.

## 4 The experiments

Four forced-choice task experiments were conducted in order to test the effect of the above-mentioned factors on determining the anchor for free reports. All

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<sup>1</sup> For related discussion in narratology, see Stanzel (1986, Ch. 7).

experiments were made in Qualtrics and had a 2x2, Latin Square design. Participants received the same instructions in all experiments. Data were analysed with generalised mixed-effects logistic regression models in R, version 3.5.2 (R Core Team 2017), function `glmer()`: (lme4 package, Bates et al. 2014) with participants and items as random factors. The best models were determined via stepwise model comparison on the basis of AIC.

#### 4.1 Experiment 1: First-person vs. third-person narratives

Experiment 1 explored the following questions: do free thought and perception reports differ with respect to triggering character-oriented readings? Does this difference depend on the type of narration in which free reports occur?

*Methods.* Experiments 1 and 2 were conducted on Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). The design of experiment 1 used two factors, REPORT TYPE (Free Perception/Free Thought), which was used in all other experiments, and NARRATION TYPE (First-person/Third-person). The experiment consisted of a two-alternative forced choice task. Participants were told that they would read short passages of fictional stories. An experimental item in the different conditions is shown below:

- (7) The whole house was empty and silent.

**First-person:** Fred and I stepped into the kitchen.

**Third-person:** Fred and Sally stepped into the kitchen.

Fred looked at the food that was left on the tables.

**Free Perception:** It looked disgusting.

**Free Thought:** Ugh, it looked disgusting! How many days had it been there?

*Whose opinion is it that the food on the tables looked disgusting?*

*The narrator's/Fred's*

The free report included a predicate of personal taste (e.g. *charming, delicious*) and the preceding sentence referred to a perceiving event (related to vision, hearing, smell or taste) whose agent was mentioned to be a character, referred to via a proper name. For the Free Perception condition simple indicative sentences were used. For the Free Thought condition, mainly questions and exclamations (22 and 10 items, respectively) were used, and also expressives, interjections and ellipsis. Participants saw 32 target items (8 per condition), as well as 10 control items that were unambiguous in terms of whose perspective was expressed. Example (8) shows a control item with *character* (here: *Steven's*) as the correct answer. Items were presented to participants in random order. Responses were collected from 40 participants.

- (8) Yes, Steven really liked Keisha, in all respects. He enjoyed hanging out with her. Plus, he found her really attractive. I could not understand this and used to laugh at him a lot. I found her one of the most boring girls at school.

*Whose opinion is it that Keisha was fun to hang out with?*

*The narrator's/Steven's*

*Results and Discussion.* Data from 28 English native speakers (11 female, mean age 38.6, age range 24-62) were analysed (12 were excluded on the basis of their responses to the controls<sup>2</sup>). Figure (1, left) shows the percentage of *character* responses per condition. NARRATION TYPE was shown to be a significant predictor ( $\beta=3.1888$ ,  $SE=0.6371$ ,  $z=5.005$ ,  $p<0.001$ , reference level: First-person), while no main effect of REPORT TYPE was found and no interaction between NARRATION TYPE and REPORT TYPE.

Regarding first-person narration, readers showed a general preference for *character* responses. This was expected for the Free Perception condition, given previous findings (Kaiser 2018, also Van Krieken 2018), and the assumptions about shared perceptual experiences. However, the preference for *character* responses in the Free Thought condition was contrary to our expectations. The results suggest that readers tend to ascribe a free report to the locally prominent character, regardless of the report type. Overall, no indication was found that considerations about the narrator’s epistemic access played a role in how readers anchored free reports. If a character is mentioned to be the experiencer of a perceiving eventuality, it is natural to expect the subsequent statement to report that character’s related experiences/reactions to that event.

In line with our predictions, the results also show that participants’ preference for the character was stronger in third-person narratives. First-person pronouns signifying the narrator were absent in Third-person narration condition, thereby resulting in the narrator’s more backgrounded status and the character’s greater prominence. However, the FID cues in the Free Thought condition did not increase the likelihood of shifting to the character’s perspective, but this may be due to the character’s overall foregrounded status, which made her/him the preferred anchor for both reports (the character was chosen in almost 95% of the cases in Third-person narration).

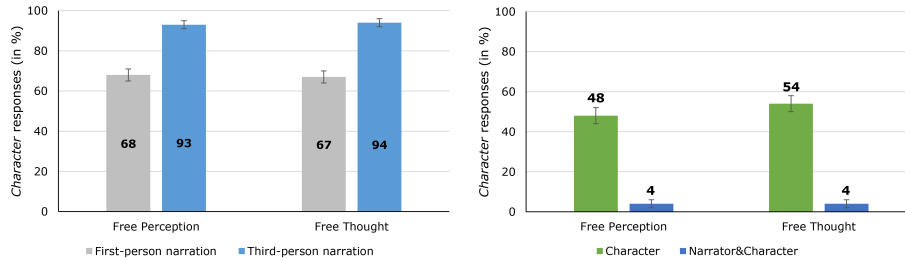


Fig. 1: The percentage of *character* responses per condition for experiments 1 (left) and 2 (right).

<sup>2</sup> Participants were excluded if more than 25% of their responses to the controls were incorrect. Because AMT is sometimes considered a noisy tool, we wanted to make sure that the data we analysed were as reliable as possible.

## 4.2 Experiment 2: Local prominence and speaker preference

Experiment 2 was a follow-up of experiment 1 and tested the effects of local prominence and speaker preference on anchoring in first-person narratives.

*Methods.* Two factors were tested: REPORT TYPE and LOCAL EXPERIENCER (Character/Narrator&Character). We used the First-person condition items of experiment 1 and manipulated who was mentioned as the agent of the perceiving event in the sentence preceding the free report: it was either the character (as in experiment 1) or both the narrator and the character. A test item is shown in (9). The same controls as in experiment 1 were used. Responses were collected from 20 participants.

- (9) The whole house was empty and silent. Fred and I stepped into the kitchen.  
**Character:** Fred looked at the food that was left on the tables.  
**Narrator & Character:** We looked at the food that was left on the tables.  
**Free Perception:** It looked disgusting.  
**Free Thought:** Ugh, it looked disgusting! How many days had it been there?

*Results and Discussion.* Data from 16 English native speakers (6 female, mean age 42.9, age range 28-72) were analysed (four participants were excluded on the basis of their responses to controls, see fn. (2)). Figure (1, right) shows the proportions of *character* responses per condition. A main effect of LOCAL EXPERIENCER was found ( $\beta=-4.6409$ ,  $SE=0.4972$ ,  $z=-9.334$ ,  $p<0.001$ , reference level: Character), no main effect of REPORT TYPE and no significant interaction. Participants chose the narrator in about 95% of the time when both the narrator and the character were the explicit experiencers, in line with our predictions. This indicates that whenever the narrator is locally prominent, there is a very strong preference for speaker-oriented interpretations.

## 4.3 Experiment 3: Global prominence and speaker preference

Experiments 3 and 4 were conducted in Greek and were run simultaneously over the internet.<sup>3</sup> The same items were used in both experiments: in experiment 3 all items were first-person stories and in experiment 4 third-person stories. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the experiments so that no participant did both experiments. Responses from 89 participants were collected, 30 of whom did not complete the survey and were therefore excluded. Here I mention only the numbers of the remaining 59 participants who completed the questionnaire (27 from experiment 3 and 32 from experiment 4).

The goal of experiment 3 was to explore if global prominence of another character would suppress speaker preference in stories with a locally prominent narrator, and if that effect would differ in perception and thought reports.

<sup>3</sup> One of the reasons to not conduct these experiments on AMT was because we expected to collect more reliable responses with about the same number of participants. This was indeed the case as only two participants were excluded from experiment 3 on the basis of their responses to controls and none from experiment 4.



*Methods.* The factors REPORT TYPE and GLOBAL PROMINENCE (Global Narrator/Global Character) were tested. In all conditions the narrator and the character were equally locally prominent. The globally prominent character was either the narrator (Global Narrator) or the character (Global Character). The globally prominent character was the grammatical subject of the first sentences of the passage that referred to actions and/or feelings whose agent was that character. The other character was made less prominent by being mentioned later in the story, usually in object or adjunct position. Participants saw a total of 40 items (24 target items and 16 controls). Example (10) shows a target item translated from Greek. Data from 27 participants were collected.

- (10) **Global Narrator:** I woke up very early that day. I hadn't slept well all night, I had been very stressed during the whole week and couldn't rest. I woke up Dina as I wanted some company to take my breakfast.  
**Global Character:** Dina woke up very early that day. She hadn't slept well all night, she had been very stressed during the whole week and couldn't rest. She woke me up as she wanted some company to take her breakfast. There was a strong smell in the kitchen. We looked at the sink and the floor.  
**Free Perception:** The sight was disgusting. There was a pile of unwashed dishes, glasses and leftovers from the previous night.  
**Free Thought:** What a disgusting sight... Those kids, they had left again a pile of unwashed dishes, glasses and leftovers from the previous night! On top of that, the tap was running and the water had reached the floor.  
*According to whom was the sight in the kitchen disgusting?*  
*According to the narrator/Dina*

*Results and Discussion.* The proportions of *character* responses per condition are shown in figure (2). Data from 25 Greek native speakers (16 female, mean age 35.3, age range 20-58) were analysed (two participants were excluded on the basis of their responses to controls). GLOBAL PROMINENCE was not found to be a significant predictor. Local prominence of the narrator may have cancelled out any effect of global prominence which could be potentially greater if the perceiving event was made implicit. A main effect of REPORT TYPE was found ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, only 4% of the data are *character* responses, which does not allow any generalisations about the influence of this factor. The results are straightforward: there is a robust preference for narrator-oriented interpretations when the narrator is locally prominent.

#### 4.4 Experiment 4: Global and local prominence

Experiment 4 tested the effect of local prominence in third-person narratives with two protagonists, while global prominence was kept constant.

*Methods.* The factors REPORT TYPE and LOCAL EXPERIENCER (Both Characters/Secondary Character) were tested in a three-alternative forced-choice task. Each story had two characters that were mentioned via proper names. One of

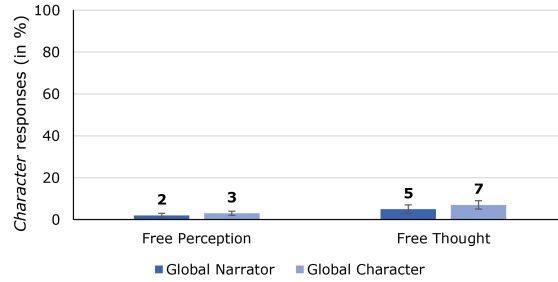


Fig. 2: The percentage of *character* responses per condition for experiment 3.

them was globally prominent across conditions (*global*) and the other was less prominent (*secondary*). Example (11) shows a target item translated from Greek:

- (11) Dina woke up very early that day. She hadn't slept well all night, she had been very stressed during the whole week and couldn't rest. She woke Michael up, as she wanted some company to take her breakfast, and they went down to the kitchen. There was a strong smell.

**Both Characters:** They looked at the sink and the floor.

**Secondary Character:** Michael looked at the sink and the floor.

**Free Perception:** The sight was disgusting. There was a pile of unwashed dishes, glasses and leftovers from the previous night.

**Free Thought:** What a disgusting sight... Those kids, they had left again a pile of unwashed dishes, glasses and leftovers from the previous night!

On top of that, the tap was running and the water had reached the floor.

*According to whom was the sight in the kitchen disgusting?*

*According to the narrator/Dina/Michael*

*Results and Discussion.* Data from 32 Greek native speakers (23 female, mean age 33.5, age range 24-54) were analysed. We estimated separate models for each pair of responses by reducing the dataset to two responses each time and performing ordinary binomial logistic regressions.

With respect to the first contrast (*narrator* vs. *global*, reference level: *narrator*), a main effect of REPORT TYPE was found ( $\beta=1.3774$ ,  $SE=0.2940$ ,  $z=4.686$ ,  $p<0.001$ , reference level: Free Perception), in line with our expectations. Readers were significantly more likely to pick the globally prominent character as the anchor for free thought reports, indicating that the presence of FID cues can trigger shifted interpretations. These findings are in line with previous experimental work on FID (Kaiser 2015).

As for the second comparison (*narrator* vs. *secondary*, reference level: *narrator*), a main effect of LOCAL EXPERIENCER ( $\beta=6.2183$ ,  $SE=0.6240$ ,  $z=9.965$ ,  $p<0.001$ , reference level: Both Characters) was found but no main effect of REPORT TYPE. In line with the results of experiment 1, these findings suggest that in the Secondary Character condition, readers are significantly more likely

to ascribe the free report to the locally prominent character, irrespectively of the report type. The results stress the importance of local prominence in the perspectivisation process of free reports, in line with Hinterwimmer’s (2017b) assumptions.

Similarly, for the third comparison (*global* vs. *secondary*, reference level: *global*), a main effect of LOCAL EXPERIENCER was found ( $\beta=5.9843$ ,  $SE=0.6985$ ,  $z=8.567$ ,  $p<0.001$ , reference level: Both Characters) but no main effect of REPORT TYPE and no interaction. Even though a globally more salient character was present, the locally prominent protagonist was preferred as the anchor of a free report.

Figure (3) shows the proportions of each response per condition.

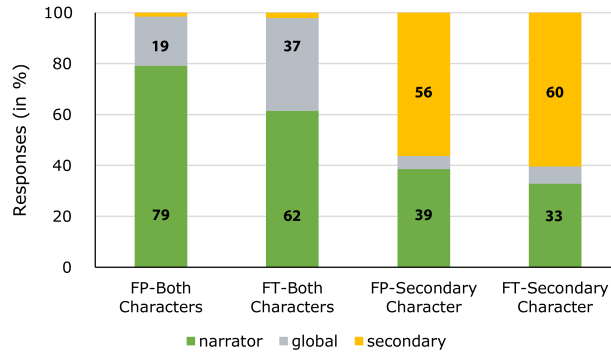


Fig. 3: The percentage of *narrator*, *global* character and *secondary* character responses per condition for experiment 4. (FP: Free Perception, FT: Free Thought)

For the Both Characters condition, a general preference for *global character* responses was expected due to that character’s overall salience. Although very few *secondary character* responses are observed, remarkably, the narrator was chosen in most of the cases. For the free perception reports, this is not so surprising; the perception report could be interpreted as true for both characters and therefore as true in the story. In turn, readers may have then attributed this fact to an authorial narrator or they may have read it as an impersonal description (see Banfield 1982, Ch. 5); *narrator* responses can be explained under different views of the notion of the narrator. A similar explanation can be made for the *narrator* responses in the Free Thought condition. Alternatively, *narrator* responses may reflect participants’ uncertainty as to who should be the anchor. Still, FID cues increased the likelihood of shifting to the global character, in line with our predictions and previous findings (Kaiser 2015).

For the Secondary Character condition, a preference for *secondary character* responses was expected, given the results of the previous experiments. For thought reports, predictions were unclear, as readers could also attribute the

FID passage to the global character due to her/his foregrounded status. Participants picked the secondary character as the anchor around 60% of the time in both kinds of reports. A possible explanation for this lower proportion compared to experiment 1 could be the presence of the global character. Uncertainty as to who the anchor is may also explain the considerable amount of *narrator* responses in this condition.

## 5 Discussion

Four experimental studies explored the effect of different pragmatic factors on anchoring free reports, i.e. stretches of discourse interpreted as descriptions of someone's perceptions or thoughts that are unmarked with respect to whose perspective is expressed. In sum, narration type was found to influence readers' choices. Although in first-person narratives with one character mentioned as the agent of a perceiving eventuality, there was a general preference for character-oriented interpretations, that preference was even stronger in third-person narratives. This can be ascribed to the absence of first-person indexicals that would explicitly introduce the narrator in the discourse. In general, there was a preference to attribute a free report to the locally prominent protagonist (also in the presence of a globally more salient one), which is in line with Hinterwimmer's (2017b) hypothesis and with previous evidence (Kaiser 2018; Van Krieken 2018). However, in order to see how strong the effect of local prominence is, future work could experiment with placing the perceiving-event sentence farther in the discourse with respect to the free report. Crucially, further research should investigate how specific discourse relations affect interpretation.

On the other hand, a robust preference for narrator-oriented readings was found when the narrator was mentioned as experiencer. Interestingly, this was also the case in third-person narratives with two locally prominent protagonists. Yet, the presence of FID cues in the thought reports raised the chances to shift to the globally prominent character's perspective, supporting the generally accepted observation that FID markers trigger character-oriented readings and corroborating previous findings (Kaiser 2015). In sum, the findings presented here extend our understanding concerning which factors license and boost non-speaker-oriented readings (and are also relevant for theories on the semantics of subjective expressions), while they also provide empirical evidence on the pragmatics of perspective taking in narrative discourse.

Except for experiment 4, no supportive evidence was found that free perception and thought reports are anchored differently. One possible explanation is that the use of questions and exclamations did not necessarily provoke a thought reading, resulting in both reports being read identically. Furthermore, the nature of the task does not actually reveal the degree of acceptability of shifted interpretations or the processing cost involved. Potential subtle differences between thought and perception reports could actually be captured with online methods like eye-tracking, as well as with different manipulations, for example with the use of temporal and locative indexical expressions.

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